

A 20-MINUTE LOOK AT THE ROCK ART OF THE COALINGA BACK COUNTRY

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By

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Slide #

- 1 During June of 1987, the CDF conducted an archeological survey of a controlled-burn project located in Los Gatos Creek canyon, approximately 20 miles northwest of the town of Coalinga in western Fresno County. Its purpose was to locate and evaluate archeological sites near areas of proposed ground disturbance and develop management recommendations for their protection. Several sites were examined and a late-prehistoric village named the "Corral Site" (CA-FRE-1346) was test excavated. The results of that study will be presented in a separate paper later this afternoon.
- 2 Upon completion of the Corral Site excavation, an archeological research group was organized. Its membership includes the field crew with three prestigious senior Archeologists named Wallace, Fenenga and Riddell, public agency archeologists, the local CDF Battalion Chief, landowners, and several Coalinga residents. Originally called the Coalinga Archeological Research Project, the group soon changed its name at the suggestion of Fritz Riddell, who pointed out that the acronym for this study group was that of a undesirable and smelly species of fish (CARP). Our organization became COALARG - The Coalinga Archeological Research Group to follow the trend established by the TULARG and FRESNARG groups.
- 3 The COALARG study area is located on the west side of the San Joaquin Valley, extending from the Fresno/Kern county line north for eighty miles to Shields Avenue just north of the community of Panoche. The western limit is the crest of the Coast Range. This boundary was chosen because it corresponds with the CDF Responsibility Area boundary for wildland fire suppression, and because the archeology of this region was so poorly known. The five primary research objectives of COALARG are:
 - (A) To identify and map all archeological sites within the study area so they can be protected, if necessary, during fire fighting, road building and land development;

- (B) To formally document such archeological sites and private collections in order to develop an archeological data base;
- (C) To provide a welcome environment for intensive archeological research;
- (D) To provide information to the residents of Coalinga and the archeological community through a Newsletter, public presentations, professional reports, and interpretive displays;
- (E) To include the public in our work.

COALARG archeological surveys have shown the region to contain a diverse array of prehistoric sites including villages, temporary camps, lithic workshops, milling stations, rock shelters, quarries, and rock art sites. Ninety-six sites have been identified, recorded and can now be protected during subsequent land management activities.

- 4 The relative site density and stylistic, cultural, and temporal affiliation of rock art sites in the southern Diablo Range has not been adequately explored, although cupules and red pictograph elements have been reported by Parkman and Payen & Olsen. The locality is situated well outside the range of known concentrations of petroglyphs, (other than cupules) and just east of a major pictograph style area. What we found, however, is that this region contains unique and characteristic rock art patterns not easily placed within the surrounding style areas.
- 5 This paper will present the results of an inventory and stylistic analysis of prehistoric rock art sites identified during the study.

[DISCUSS MAP W/POINTER]

- 6 Birdwell Rock, the first of three sites located in the mountain/upland region of the study area, consists of a large, elaborately-decorated sandstone boulder, four cupule boulders, and 14 bedrock mortars.
- 7 The main boulder is approximately 4 meters tall with the entire east-facing vertical surface decorated with carvings.
- 8 The rock was severely damaged by the massive 6.0 (Richter Scale) Nunez Fault earthquake of July 1983 that widened two central fissures and caused a large rock segment to break loose and fall.
- 9 Exfoliation of rock surfaces containing petroglyph motifs increased as a result of the earthquake so that only patches of the red-colored patina remain. The rock art was deeply pecked and ground into this surface, however, and fortunately can still be accurately recorded.
- 10 Four distinctive anthropomorphic figures are present in the lower left portion of Birdwell Rock, although the majority of elements occur as orderly rows of dots or punctations.

- 11 These are much smaller and should not be confused with cupules. They range in diameter from 0.5 to 3.5cm but most are smaller than 2.0cm.
- 12 Birdwell Rock is situated one mile west of a prominent boulder-studded ridgeline, and considerably distant from the closest known habitation site which occurs two miles south and 1,000 feet below.
- 13 Interestingly, a commanding view of Donut rock is afforded from this rock art site.
[USE POINTER TO SHOW DONUT ROCK]
- 14 Prior to its complete demise during the 1983 Nunez Fault earthquake, Donut Rock was a magnificent arch and was in clear view from all three mountain sites.
- 15 One mile east of Donut Rock which is again in clear view
[USE POINTER TO SHOW DONUT ROCK],
is the Black Mountain site.
- 16 This site is a relatively simple yet remarkably unusual petroglyph panel. It is situated on top of a hill in an open, treeless grassland, with the closest known habitation site one mile to the south.
- 17 Petroglyphs are the only evidence of aboriginal use; no mortars, cuples, flakes, or midden are present. This is the only site the study group found in such a setting and not associated with other cultural remains.
- 18 The rock art is located on a large sandstone boulder approximately two meters in diameter and is contained within a small vertical surface with dark brown patina.
- 19 The aboriginal artist produced the rock art by deeply scratching through the dark cortex and exposing the lighter parent material. Present are a number of motifs formed by clusters of lines. Two, interpreted as possible representations of a sunburst and an arch, could well be a rendering of a sunrise view of Donut Rock on the adjacent ridgeline. This site may provide support for Donald Lipp's 1986 interpretation of Birdwell Rock as an open-air ceremonial site and solstice observatory which may have been used in conjunction with Donut Rock as a solstice observation point.
- 20 Indeed, this motif does include an arch, ridgeline, and possible rising sun.
- 21 Another interesting motif at Black Mountain is a series of three inverted "V"'s or peaks. This figure is thought to be a representation of the other important landmark on this ridge,
- 22 Joaquin Rocks. Also known as "Three Sisters", Joaquin rocks form a distinctive series of 3 sharp peaks when viewed from a distant location.

- 23 The third mountain site is Buckwheat, which is a large and complex occupation site located adjacent to a permanent spring on a series of benches bound on either side by steep ravines.
- 24 It consists of ten bedrock milling features, three distinct midden deposits, four cupule boulders and a scatter of artifacts including sandstone bowl mortars, a pestle, an obsidian drill, desert side-notched projectile point, and burned fragments of mammal bone, charcoal and shell. Of particular interest to this study, the Buckwheat site also contains an outstanding panel of petroglyphs.
- 25 Like at Birdwell Rock, the panel occurs on the vertical surface of a large sandstone boulder.
- 26 It is composed entirely of dots or drilled holes and incised lines or grooves. There are 425 individual dots and 88 grooves present on this one-square-meter surface. They are clustered to form distinctive motifs including linear arrangements of drilled holes, clusters of parallel grooves, and groove and dot combinations.
- 27 One of the combinations, which occurs 5 times, is the placement of tightly clustered drilled holes inside a vertical groove.
- 28 Another groove and dot combination is an anthropomorphic figure with a phallic appendage, quite similar to human-like motifs at Birdwell Rock.
- 29 Most of the dots measure 1.5cm in diameter, and 0.5cm deep, but others are only 1cm diameter and 2cm deep indicating manufacture by drilling rather than grinding.
- 30 Along White Creek, two miles above its confluence with Los Gatos Creek, is the Joaquin Mill Site, which includes a cave, a rockshelter, housepit, lithic scatter, bedrock mortars, and midden.
- 31 Of particular interest are the rock art elements inside the cave, which is approximately 2 meters high, 3.5 meters wide, and 9 meters deep. 14 cupules occur on a vertical and sloping surface, just above ground level.
- 32 The cupules are relatively large (3-5cm) and seem to be placed in orderly horizontal rows.
- 33 The cave ceiling blackened by smoke and natural staining also contains unusual pictograph elements. Included is a motif consisting of a circle and intersecting lines which could be classified as a possible sun symbol; approximately 50cm away is another design which consists of ten or so intersecting lines.
- 34 The designs were not scratched into the ceiling but marked over blackened areas with a white-colored substance. This material was rubbed onto the rough ceiling surface and clearly skips over recessed areas.

- 35 The Cupule Point Site is located on Los Gatos Creek, occupying a point of land that projects into a huge sweeping bend in the drainage.
- 36 A cluster of large and small sandstone boulders, 27 of which have been decorated with a total of 236 cupules, occurs at the toe of the ridge. There is no midden in direct association, but a major village site lies nearby. A scatter of chert flakes, a mano, and numerous cobble tools, perhaps used for cupule manufacture, also were found.
- 37 The cupules often are clustered on boulder surfaces facing south towards the creek as seen here on Rock #1. They range in size from 2 to 4.5cm in diameter and from 0.5 to 1.5cm deep, but are remarkably similar in shape. Most appear as a broad, dish-shaped depression, abraded smooth after having been pecked. Datura grows conspicuously in a pocket between several of the decorated boulders.
- 38 Sometimes as seen at Rock #13, the cupules are clustered along a distinctive edge to the rock surface.
- 39 Cupules also were seen clustered along the rock edge formed by the surface of the ground.
- 40 Sadly, on December 6, 1989, only 10 months after COALARG had carefully recorded the site, CDF discovered during a routine inspection that most of the cupule boulders had been dislodged with a backhoe and removed.
- 41 A week later, sandstone boulders mysteriously appeared as landscaping improvements at the Peppertree Townhomes, an apartment complex in downtown Coalinga.
- 42 The Fresno County Sheriff's office began an investigation and requested the assistance of CDF and COALARG to determine if these boulders came from Cupule Point.
- 43 It was easy to prove that they did. The rock formation, color, and material was similar and many boulders at Peppertree contained cupules.
- 44 Rock #1 which was the largest boulder at the site.
- 45 Rock #13, with its distinctive cracks and cupule pattern, well documented during this study, were unmistakably recognized. The individual responsible for Cupule Point's destruction was later arrested and convicted of grand theft. He was fined, and was ordered to return the boulders to the site.
- 46 Mule Ranch is an occupation site situated adjacent to a reliable spring that surfaces in a seasonal stream bed in the lower drainage corridor and along a major trail.

- 47 It consists of a midden deposit, bedrock mortars, a scatter of chipped and ground stone artifacts, and 7 cupule boulders containing a minimum of 48 individual cupules.

[USE A POINTER TO SHOW CUPULE BOULDERS]

- 48 These ranged in size from 4cm in diameter by 1cm deep, saucer-shaped pits similar to Cupule Point to unusually large, 12cm diameter by 7cm deep steep-sided cups.
- 49 This was the only rock examined during the study where it was difficult to distinguish small bedrock mortars from large cupules. Since many of the cups appear on a vertical or sloping surface, they were considered to be unusually large cupules.
- 50 The last site examined during this rock art survey was Birdwell Ranch. It consists of a single sandstone cupule boulder situated in the lower reaches of Los Gatos Creek and along a major trail. A midden deposit lies nearby and, as at Cupule Point, Datura grows adjacent to the rock art.
- 51 Approximately 50 cupules have been pecked and ground into the flat upper rock surfaces which face slightly towards the creek. They range in size from 2.5 to 5.0cm in diameter and from 1.0 to 2.0cm deep.
- 52 Numerous cobble tools were discovered adjacent to the cupule boulders at Cupule Point, Mule Ranch, and other sites in the region. A careful inspection of the wear patterns strongly suggests that these tools were employed during cupule manufacture. The identification of cupule-making tools is a significant result of this study. Three different types of stone tools were identified, which presumably, were used sequentially to produce a cupule.
- 53 The first is a fist-size angular cobble with numerous heavily-battered protuberances. This specialized type of hammerstone is thought to have been used to initially peck-out a cupule depression through direct percussion.
- 54 The second type is a specialized cobble pestle with an exceedingly pointed distal end. Damage and wear patterns on the tip of this implement indicates contact with a saucer-shaped depression 3-5cm in diameter. Percussion flake scars near its tip suggests heavy pounding and/or grinding.
- 55 The final tool type, classified as an abrader, it is another specialized cobble pestle, usually well-shaped, and with a pronounced concave distal end. Examination of the wear patterns suggests contact with a saucer-shaped depression 3-5cm in diameter. Its polished surface and absence of battered scars indicates employment as an abrader, presumably, to complete the manufacture of a cupule.

All seven sites were evaluated according to a set of attributes chosen to demonstrate patterning and to elicit clues concerning site interpretations. This resulted in the recognition and isolation of two distinctive types of rock art sites, the Coalinga Upland Style, represented by the Birdwell Rock and Buckwheat sites, and the Western San Joaquin Cupule Style, represented by the Cupule Point, Birdwell Ranch, and Mule Ranch sites. The remaining two sites do not fit in either of these tentatively proposed styles.

We suggest that two of the seven sites, Birdwell Rock and Buckwheat, exhibit sufficient similarities to be characterized as a common style, which we named COALINGA UPLAND. Sites of this proposed style can be recognized by the following traits:

- 1) Located in a mountain/upland setting, rather than along lower drainages.
- 2) Dominated by the use of dots, drill hole punctations, and grooves, often in complex arrangements.
- 3) Tight linear arrangements of small dots extremely common.
- 4) Phallic anthropomorphs.
- 5) Drill holes sometimes inside the grooves.
- 6) Bedrock mortars and cupule boulders nearby.
- 7) Curvilinear motifs and complex circle and dot arrangements possible.

Three sites (Cupule Point, Mule Ranch, and Birdwell Ranch) and others observed in the general region (including Indian Point at O'Neil Forebay and two sites in Del Puerto Canyon) exhibit sufficiently similar cultural attributes to be characterized as a common style. We propose the designation as WESTERN SAN JOAQUIN CUPULE STYLE which can be recognized by the following traits:

- 1) Cupule boulders located along stream margins, often on streams which were used as travel corridors between the San Joaquin Valley and the coast (e.g., Los Gatos, Orestimba, Cottonwood).
- 2) Distribution along the western edge of the San Joaquin Valley on the eastern foothills of the Coast Range and rarely (if ever) as far west as the summit of this range.
- 3) Associated with late prehistoric occupation sites located directly at the cupule site or in close proximity.
- 4) House pits sometimes occur nearby.
- 5) Cupules never organized in rows or lines, but arranged in clusters, quite often located on a sloping surface facing a trail or creek.
- 6) Broad, shallow, smooth cupules, 3cm in diameter and 1cm deep, are most common, but some variants occur. Most, but not all, are ground smooth with an abrader.
- 7) Bedrock mortars present.

It should be emphasized that we are not attempting to lump all cupule occurrences within the region into a single "style". There are cupules at Joaquin Mill and another recently discovered site at the mouth of White Creek. Cupules occur too at Birdwell Rock and Buckwheat, but do not share the characteristic attributes of the proposed Western San Joaquin Cupule Style.

A possible link to coastal rock art sites is suggested at Birdwell Rock and Buckwheat. Both are remarkably similar to two petroglyph boulders on the coast. One of these is Pool Rock (CA-SBa-1632), a large sandstone boulder in Santa Barbara County decorated with figures dominated by the use of dots and lines. Although Pool Rock contains numerous bear track motifs, absent from Birdwell Rock, and lacks the phallic anthropomorphs present on the latter, one is immediately struck by a feeling of similarity. Likewise, a rock art site in coastal San Luis Obispo County (CA-SLO-832) is remarkably similar to the Buckwheat site in its dominant use of vertical grooves, drill-hole punctations, and punctations placed inside grooves. Coastal people visited the Coalinga study area during trading expeditions, as noted previously by Latta, and they may well have been responsible for the art style.

In Conclusion, The Diablo Range is one of the least known archeological zones in the state, particularly with respect to rock art. Although thought to be "unimportant" and with "few residents" by Kroeber (1925:476) (probably due to the paucity of available information), recent archeological studies have shown this to be a mistaken view. The study area contains an enormous quantity and variety of archeological remains which suggest more than casual occupation in prehistoric times.

The seven rock art sites of the study group organized into two styles, with two anomalous sites, all seem to date roughly to the Late Period. This suggests that rock art in the region underwent an evolution during this period, or, that two distinct groups of people produced it. We tend to favor the latter notion and further suggest that the mountain rock art may have been made by coastal rather than interior people.

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Thank you very much

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